DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 223 RC 013 547

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TITLE Capacity Building Needs of Rural Areas in Virginia. Executive Summary and Recommendations.
INSTITUTION Virginia State Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Richmond, Va.
SPONS AGENCY National Science Foundation, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Sep 78
GRANT ISP76-20175
NOTE 22p.; For related document, see RC 013 548.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Agency Cooperation; Citizen Participation; *Community Planning; Coordination; *Fiscal Capacity; *Local Government; *Needs Assessment; *Rural Areas; Staff Utilization
IDENTIFIERS *Capacity Building; *Virginia

ABSTRACT

To assess the capacity building needs of rural areas brought on both by internal demands of local citizens for improvements in community assistance and services and demands placed on local communities by higher levels of government, information and data were obtained from personal interviews with 93 local officials and 344 community leaders in 8 rural areas of Virginia in 1977. Major community needs were found to exist in engineering and public works, industrial development, recreation, education, health and welfare, housing, and planning. The five major capacity building needs were fiscal, staffing, planning, citizen participation, and inter-governmental coordination. Lack of adequate finances was a major capacity gap uncovered in all communities. Rural local governments were being called upon to handle assignments that required an increasingly higher degree of staff professionalism. Although comprehensive plans had been developed in rural communities, such plans were not widely followed in making decisions. Because financial and personnel resources were limited, rural local governments relied heavily on citizen volunteers. To retain rural government viability in program activities requiring large capital investments, specialized expertise, and area-wide planning, increased attention was being given to pooling of available resources. Recommendations are included for each of the identified gaps. (BRR)

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CAPACITY BUILDING

CAPACITY BUILDING NEEDS OF RURAL AREAS IN VIRGINIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

BERKWOOD M. FARMER, ANTHONY A. HICKEY,
EDWARD H. HANSEN, IRL W. SMITH, MARK H. SILVERMAN

VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER
SERVICES (VDACS)

SEPTEMBER 1978

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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This study is based upon research supported in part by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. ISP76-20175.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation or the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Acknowledgements

The authors of this study are indebted to a large number of persons who assisted in various aspects.

Recognition is extended to the 93 local officials and the 344 community leaders in the counties of Buckingham, Lancaster, Powhatan and Sussex, and the towns of Chatham, Glade Spring, South Hill, and Woodstock who provided the basic information used in this study. Additionally, the cooperation of officials and citizen leaders in Strasburg, Virginia, the pilot study area, is gratefully acknowledged.

Special recognition is given to Dr. Charles H. Baldwin, Department of Sociology, George Mason University, for his invaluable consultative services. Dr. Baldwin was instrumental in the development of survey designs and analysis procedures.

Thanks, too, are extended to the following persons who provided counseling and other assistance of a specific nature. Stanley S. Kidwell, Jr., Richard N. Burton and Hugh J. Furr of the Virginia Office of Intergovernmental Affairs; H. Bland Franklin, Jr., Extension Agent, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; Charles E. Miller, State-Federal Crop Reporting Service; Henry Budd and Roy Seward of the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS); and J. Norman Reid, Social Science Analyst, Economics, Statistics, and Cooperatives Service, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

A very special thanks to Joyce H. Pye, Betty Clarke and Helen Bane of VDACS for their most valuable secretarial services.

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

The fact that rural local governments must perform significant roles in developing and carrying out programs and services that affect the local community is widely accepted by citizens and officials. This role is becoming increasingly difficult when demands on local government for programs and services are evaluated in light of institutional capabilities and resource supplies.

This study of capacity building needs of rural areas addresses both the internal demand of local citizens for improvements in community assistance and services and the demand by higher levels of government which are being placed on local communities. Rural communities are increasingly required to implement programs mandated by state and federal governments with inadequate resources and information to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Too often, when assistance by state and federal agencies is available, it is provided in an uncoordinated manner that may be more confusing than helpful.

This study addresses available institutional and resource capabilities to meet community needs. Types of assistance available to local communities will affect their long-run autonomy and viability.

The study accomplished four major objectives:

- It identified community needs. These are areas that require attention in order to improve the quality of life.
- It identified capacity building needs. Capacity building is the adequacy and effectiveness of local institutional capabilities and resources to supply programs and services in order to meet the community needs.
- It identified capacity building gaps. A gap occurs in a specific program or service area when the local capacity building needs exceed institutional and resource capabilities.
- It suggests mechanisms that could be used to minimize or alleviate the capacity building gaps.

Information and data used in this study were obtained from personal interviews conducted with 93 local officials and 344 community leaders in eight rural areas of Virginia in 1977. Local officials included all elected and appointed persons in policymaking and management roles. Traditional sampling procedures were used in selecting community leaders.

The conceptual model used in this study is shown in Figure 1, page xiv, and represents syntheses of the theories and research procedures used. The model includes community structure, information from elected and appointed officials, and information from community leaders. Likewise, it includes consideration of community satisfaction—evaluation of community services by community leaders—as well as the needs of the community as perceived and defined by local officials and community leaders. The model additionally includes an institutional and resource capability network which represents both local and extra-community inputs to the community. Finally, the concept of prime interest, capacity building gaps, is shown as related to institutional and resource capabilities and needs.

Community structure includes governmental status, i.e., whether the community is a town or a county; and demographic type which includes areas growing and areas with stable or declining populations. Community structure was found to be related to both institutional and resource capabilities

and needs. Specifically, officials in stable and declining communities perceived more local governmental needs than did officials in growth areas. Also, county officials were more satisfied with assistance being received from state government and the federal government than were town officials.

Community leaders in towns, relative to counties, were more satisfied with protection, educational, and general community services; planning activities; and access to health care. Community leaders in counties, on the other hand, were more satisfied with the existing level of community development.

Characteristics of local officials, both elected and appointed, included the number of years in position, race, sex, age, educational attainment, family income and number of years in the community. It was found that officials' perceptions of institutional and resource capabilities varied according to some of the characteristics of the officials.

Similar sociodemographic data were also obtained for community leaders and their perceptions of community needs varied according to many of their characteristics. Specific relationships of the perceptions of officials and leaders are shown in Table 1, page xv, and Table 2, page xvi, respectively.

Overall, community structure, characteristics of local officials and characteristics of community leaders were found to be important factors in identifying the needs and services of rural communities and relationships of such needs and services to institutional and resource capabilities. Local officials tended to have rather consistent perceptions toward community needs and the operation of local governments while considerable differences were found to exist in citizen perceptions of community needs and services. Of all factors considered in this study, the place of residence of officials and community leaders, i.e., town or county, was found to be the strongest and most consistent factor when attitudinal differences were observed.

Major community needs were found to exist in:

- Engineering and public works. Needs within this category are improvements and/or expansions in sewerage, water and solid waste disposal systems, roads, streets, sidewalks, curbs and gutters, and street lights.
- Industrial development. Needs were expressed for a more extensive base to increase employment opportunities, broaden the tax base, and provide more stimulus to local business development.
- Recreation. Demand in this area included tennis, swimming, golf, commercial recreation, recreational centers and the establishment of local parks.
- Education. Concerns related mostly to improvements in the quality of education and the ability of rural areas to attract and retain qualified teachers.
- Health and Welfare. Concerns related primarily to the availability of doctors and medical facilities and the general administration of welfare programs.
- Housing. A major concern was the lack of an adequate housing mix to meet the needs of all people in the community.
- Planning. Changes in land use, increasing concern for the environment and apprehension about the general quality of life have created a new emphasis on planning at the local community level.

The top three community needs were engineering and public works, industrial development and recreation. These three needs were agreed upon by leaders and officials.

The five major capacity building needs identified in this study were: 1) fiscal; 2) staffing; 3) planning; 4) citizen participation; and 5) inter-governmental coordination.

The following summarizes the major causes of each capacity building need and the resulting capacity building gaps:

Need:	Cause:	Gap:
• **Fiscal**	• **New and expanded services** **Higher citizen expectation** **Mandates** **Regressive nature of local revenues**	• **Lack of adequate local tax revenues** **Uncertainty of state and federal funds** **Red tape in obtaining state and federal funds** **Number of inconsistent and unrealistic mandates** **Ineffective local planning and planning support**

Need:	Cause:	Gap:
	• Residential growth and development	• Ineffective local planning Lack of funds to provide services Revenues lag behind increases in service costs
	• State and federal laws and regulations	• Lack of adequate budgeting for personnel costs
	• Inflation	• Inability to absorb increased costs Ineffective long-run cost and benefit projections
• Staffing	• General personnel problems	• Lack of adequate funds Insufficient qualified staff Unattractive work environment Relatively low salaries Lack of adequate supervision
	• Training	• Few training opportunities for persons in administration and public works relative to other staff positions Time and distance factors General apathy toward written publications
	• Technical assistance	• Inadequate technical assistance Inadequate program evaluation expertise Lack of timely information and data Lack of coordinated technical assistance for mandated programs
• Planning	• Citizen demands for new and expanded services Mandated programs Inflation Regressive nature of local revenues	• Lack of adequate local tax revenue Uncertainty of state and federal funds Number of inconsistent and unrealistic mandates Ineffective local planning and planning support

Need:	Cause:	Gap:
	• Land-use pressures	• Land-use plans are not effectively used in decision making processes Lack of citizen understanding and support
	• Insufficient data and information	• Lack of timely and accurate data Lack of evaluative capabilities
• Citizen Participation	• Time commitments Public Liability Conflict of interest Harrassment Freedom of Information Act	• Inadequate participation of qualified persons in management, decision making and policy areas
	• Lack of knowledge about local government Inadequate communication between officials and citizens Poor scheduling of policy meetings	• Loss of citizen input Ineffective planning process Loss of citizen support of community efforts
• Intergovernmental Coordination	• Mandates Program changes Lack of technical knowledge Lack of funds Different requirements by agencies conducting similar programs	• Parochialism Lack of information and communication

If small rural governments are to be viable and deliver effective programs and services to their citizens, improvements must occur in the above five areas of capacity building needs. Continuing gaps in these areas may cause rural areas to lose viability, become less responsive to local citizen needs, and impede the future implementation of policies and programs at the federal and state levels.

One important finding in this study is that most capacity building gaps can be reduced without large additional expenditures of taxpayers' money or creating additional bureaucratic units in government. The study clearly demonstrates that rural communities must be willing to sacrifice a certain amount of autonomy for gains in viability. Based on this study, opposite trade-offs do not appear feasible. In a federal system of government, governmental units that comprise the system are highly dependent on one another. Failures to perform at local levels of government require direct actions at a higher governmental level if citizen expectations are to be met.

This study pointed out capacity building gaps of concern to rural local governments. Many of the gaps are caused by factors external to the community over which rural local governments have little or no control. Thus, the viability of rural local governments is increasingly dependent on the external resource and institutional capability network. Strengthening the network to provide appropriate, timely and adequate

assistance and assuring a meaningful role for rural local governments is a challenge currently facing state and federal governments. Federal and state governments cannot back away from this challenge.

Easier commuter access to rural areas along with the tendency of industry and government to establish more of their facilities in such areas are among factors causing social, demographic and economic change in rural America. Citizens in rural areas are increasingly demanding services similar to those available in urban areas. Yet, many rural citizens and officials want to retain a rural atmosphere in which high priority is given to environmental quality and to the preservation of productive agricultural land and open spaces.

Legislation aimed at strengthening the role of local governments has been enacted at the state and federal level and numerous programs are being conducted with an objective of strengthening the linkages between federal, state and local governments.

In this summary, discussion will center on types of actions that, in the view of the authors, should be considered by rural local governments, state governments and the federal government, to cope with major capacity building gaps identified in the study. The recommendations are more concerned with approaches to strengthen the institutional and resource capability network than in specific actions to be taken in individual program areas.

Gaps Associated With Fiscal Needs

Findings—Lack of adequate finances was a major capacity gap uncovered in all communities. While this tends to be a universal concern of local governments, small rural local governments are faced with diseconomics of scale which are related to size and density of population and lack of an extensive tax base. They must expend a larger share of their revenues than larger jurisdictions to cover basic overhead costs.

Local governments are highly dependent on state government actions in the fiscal area. This is because the state sets limits on local taxing authorities and can require local governments to take actions to conform to state program requirements with or without assurances of additional state funding assistance. Also, the state owns land and facilities which are not subject to local taxation.

Conclusion—Rural local governments must be able to obtain sufficient revenues to perform basic functions of local government plus the additional responsibilities placed on them by state and federal mandates.

Recommendations—It is recommended that:

- Local governments make a maximum effort to close fiscal capacity gaps through local tax efforts and cost-effective management; and that programs of financial assistance be designed to reward, not penalize, localities that make maximum efforts in this regard.
- Existing mechanisms within state government be utilized to provide constant monitoring of the impacts that state and federal actions have on fiscal capabilities of rural local government. Information obtained from such monitoring should be made available on a regular basis to the General Assembly and to the Office of the Governor.
- Determinations be made at the state level as to whether specific mandates can be realistically applied to rural areas without guaranteed additional state and/or federal support.
- The Attorney General's Office monitor regulations prepared by state agencies to assure that they are in conformance with the intent of the law and still provide localities the widest possible flexibility in achieving objectives in a cost-effective manner.
- Impact statements on proposed state legislation affecting local governments be prepared and accompany such bills through the General Assembly.
- State and federal agencies coordinate their activities so that local government officials can basically work with one agency in a given program area.
- Local and state officials begin immediately to investigate and evaluate other sources of local revenues that are less regressive than property taxes.
- Additional state funds be made available to nonmetropolitan planning district commissions in which current sources of funds and resources are inadequate to provide the technical and administrative support needed by rural jurisdictions within the district.

Gaps Associated With Staffing Needs

Findings—Rural local governments are being called upon to handle assignments that require an increasingly higher degree of professionalism. Relatively low salaries, limited advancement opportunities and a work environment considered unattractive by some professionals, are gaps that

make it difficult to recruit and retain competent personnel.

More outside technical assistance than is currently available from the public sector was found to be particularly needed in the planning and development of complex high cost capital improvement type projects. Training opportunities are available but not always at the time and place that encourage attendance from rural officials and their staffs. A lack of capability to properly evaluate program effectiveness also has resulted in some inefficiency in utilization of existing personnel.

Conclusion—Rural local governments must be staffed to perform their functions in a professional and effective manner, and have access to technical assistance and information on a timely basis.

Recommendations—It is recommended that:

- Local governments establish and periodically review job descriptions of all staff personnel and provide for clearcut lines of authority and responsibility.
- The state provide a uniform system of structuring local government staffs which could be adopted by local governments on an optional basis.
- A state wide technical assistance consortium, consisting of state and federal agencies, planning district commissions, public and private institutions of higher learning, and public interest groups, be established. The purpose of the consortium would be to provide appropriate technical assistance to rural local governments by locating and coordinating the assistance available from the various groups and assuring that it is effectively utilized at the local level.

Gaps Associated With Planning Needs

Findings—Although comprehensive plans have been developed in the rural communities, such plans were not widely followed in making local governmental or land-use decisions. Citizen understanding and support of planning efforts was low in rural areas. Gaps in the planning area were similar to those found in the fiscal area.

Rural officials encountered difficulties in obtaining and effectively utilizing information and data in evaluating project and service activities and in general decision making processes. Improper use of data in planning has costly and long-run effects. Also, failure to respond to a state and/or federal announcement or regulation, on a timely basis, can have adverse financial and/or legal ramifications.

Conclusion—Greater attention needs to be given to the overall planning process in rural areas. Timely, relevant, and comprehensible data must be made available to local officials for use in their planning and decision making processes.

Recommendations—It is recommended that:

- Local governments take steps to involve more citizens in the planning process.
- Local government officials make a conscious effort to relate current decisions to long-run plans of the community.
- Local governments work with state agencies and universities in collecting, summarizing, analyzing, and reporting locally generated data in a uniform manner so it can be used to supplement and improve federal, state and regional data.
- A state agency be designated to assemble, screen, summarize and distribute data and information, including appropriate state and federal regulations of special interest to local governments.
- The state government should encourage the development of computer models which can be used by local government officials. These models will help officials analyze data for use in planning and decision making and provide them a basis for comparing benefits and costs of local services to those of other jurisdictions.

Gaps Associated With Citizen Participation Needs

Findings—Because financial and personnel resources are limited, rural local governments must rely heavily on citizen volunteer inputs to maintain their viability. Local officials are concerned that an increasing number of competent and qualified citizens are reluctant to seek public office or serve on policymaking boards and/or commissions. Fear of liability suits or other civil actions resulting from a failure to comply with disclosure and conflict of interest laws are making citizens wary of becoming involved in local governmental activities. This is especially exasperating since volunteers work for little or no compensation.

It was found that many citizens were uninformed or had misconceptions of the role of local governments. Also, the matter of communication between officials and citizens is something that needs constant attention. Any breakdown in communication can contribute to a loss of citizen support and understanding of community efforts.

Conclusion—Actions should be taken to encourage greater citizen participation in rural local govern-

ments.

Recommendations—It is recommended that:

- State and federal laws originally enacted to provide more open and responsive government, be reviewed to determine whether, in actual application, they are tending to reduce citizen participation in local government.
- Local and state governments consider additional ways to provide recognition to volunteers.
- Federal general revenue sharing formulas be modified to give more weight to the use of volunteers in lieu of salaried employees.
- Local governments establish local professional ad hoc advisory committees to make better use of local talents.
- Greater efforts be focused on conducting local citizen participation forums.
- Training opportunities be made available to new appointees to policymaking boards and commissions.

Gaps Associated With Intergovernmental Coordination Needs

Findings—To retain rural government viability in program activities requiring large capital investments, specialized expertise, and area wide planning, increased attention is being given to pooling of available resources. The increasing number of interjurisdictional agreements in rural areas is evidence that a long time attitude of parochialism is becoming less pronounced.

The need for a stronger rural government interface with the state and federal government, to represent their interests in intergovernmental program decisions and implementation, was noted.

Conclusion—Intergovernmental coordination at the local level must be encouraged in order for rural local governments to realistically structure, operate and maintain activities of area wide significance that require large fiscal outlays, and a high degree of technological expertise and application.

Recommendations—It is recommended that:

- Local governments evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of specific bilateral or multilateral agreements with other local governments for services related to sewerage and water, solid waste management, law enforcement, recreation, vocational education, health services, assistance to the handicapped, transportation, and other programs in order to improve services and efficiencies.
- Planning district commissions encourage and work out arrangements for local rural jurisdictions to share specialized personnel such as managers, engineers, architects and planners where determined to be mutually beneficial.
- State and federal governments actively encourage coordination at the local level by removing any constraints in program implementation that hamper or discourage intergovernmental coordination efforts.
- A Rural Capacity Building Advisory Committee be established to advise the Secretary of Commerce and Resources in facilitating private, local, state and federal efforts for strengthening the governing capabilities of rural governments. This strengthening process would be aimed at maintaining autonomy while increasing the viability of rural governments in the most cost-effective manner.

Figure 1 **CONCEPTUAL MODEL**

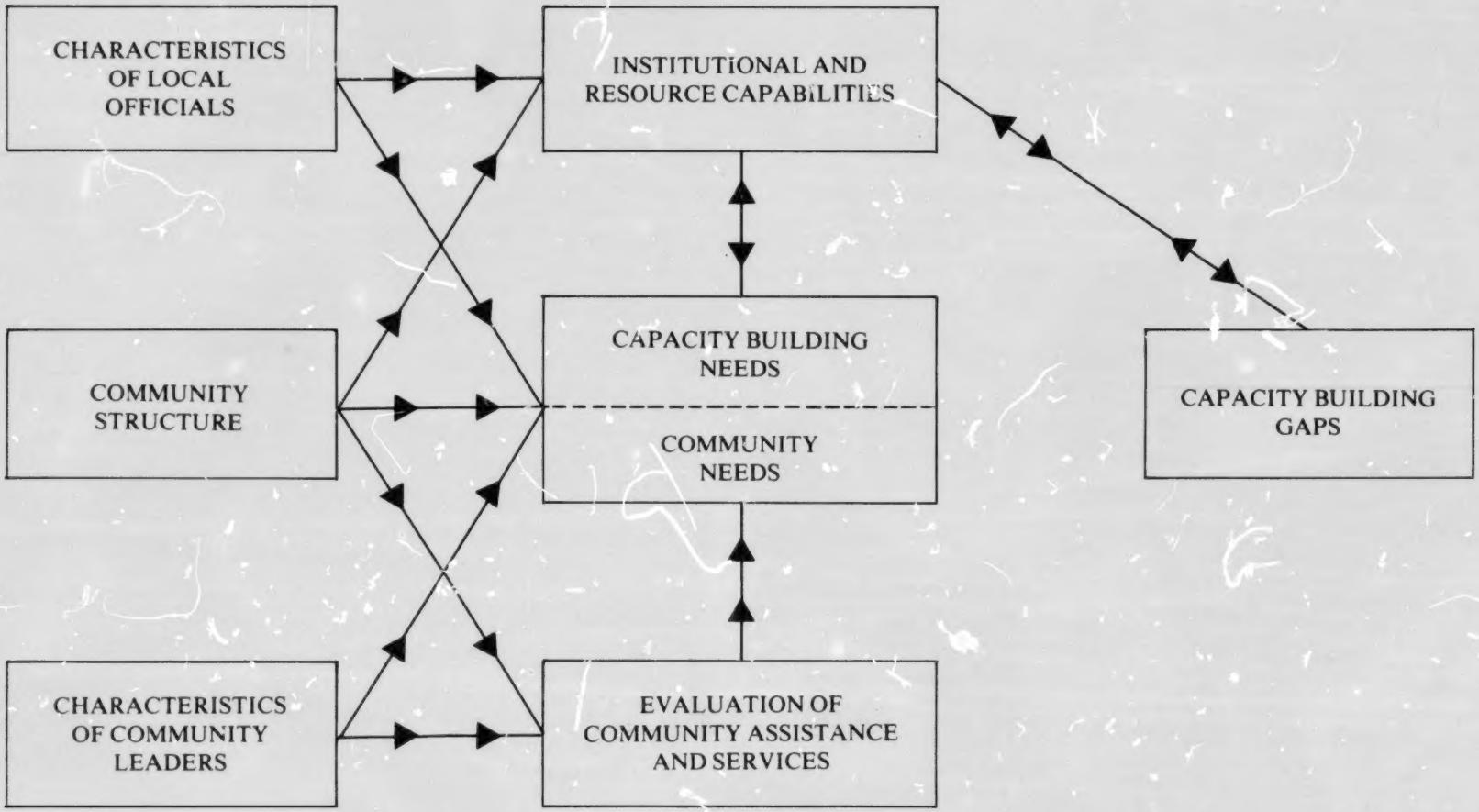

Table 1. Summary of the significant findings of officials' attitudes regarding institutional and resource capability components

Independent Variables		Dependent Variables									
		Local Governmental Needs		Existing Personnel Situation		Impressions of State Assistance		Impressions of Federal Assistance		Need for Outside Assistance	
		Perceived More	Perceived Less	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied
Demographic Change	Increasing Population		X								
	Stable and Declining Pop.	X									
Area	Towns			X			X		X		
	Counties				X	X		X			
Education	High School Education or less			X							
	Post High School Education				X						
Age	Older Officials			X		X					
	Younger Officials				X		X				
Years in Position	Shorter Time in Position				X						
	Longer Time in Position			X							
Years in Community	15 Years or Less			X							
	Over 15 Years				X						

Table 2. Summary of the significant findings of community leaders' evaluations of assistance and services provided community

Independent Variables	Dependent Variables													
	Protective Services		Educational Services		Community Development		Community Assistance		Planning Activities		Access to Health Care		Community Services	
	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied	More Satisfied	Less Satisfied
Town	X		X			X			X		X		X	
County		X		X	X					X		X		X
Increasing Population				X		X			X		X			
Stable or Declining Population			X		X					X		X		
White	X				X		X				X		X	
Black		X				X		X				X		X
Male								X						
Female							X							
Older than 31				X	X									
Younger than 31			X			X								
Six years and over in community							X				X		X	
Under six years in community								X				X		X
$30,000 and over family income					X						X		X	
Under $30,000 family income						X						X		X
High School and under		X											X	
Over High School	X													X